

4 DAY ONE: HELP CHILDREN TO WRITE AND KEEP WRITING

Writing is a studio subject. I invite children to do something I am already doing. Just as an artist in the studio paints alongside her students, I write along with the children. A piano teacher may show his student how to play a particular passage, but occasionally, he plays an entire piece so that his student can experience the beauty of it.

This chapter will focus on the simplest of beginnings—Day One in the teaching of writing. My invitations to the children will be similar to the invitations I extended to you in Chapter 3. I will show them where writing comes from, how I begin to write, and how I keep on writing. And I will demonstrate how I circulate through the class while the children are writing, first with kindergarten and first grade, then with second through sixth grades.

Kindergarten and Grade One

Depending on how much experience you have had with children, you will need to decide which of several approaches will work best for you. Some teachers begin with the entire class. They invite children to sit on the rug or pull them together on the floor and chat with them as a group. An invitation to write begins almost as an intimate conversation.

Other teachers, especially those who are beginning to teach writing for the first time or want to listen more carefully to the reactions of individual children, will find a small group better. Whether with an entire class or a small group, your conversations with children will be similar to the ones I share in this chapter.

If you choose the cluster route, begin with five or six children who show some sign of using letters, who can write their name, or whose drawings are beginning to show more extensive content than a simple drawing of one object or contain far more than random lines.

I'll probably use experience chart paper or the chalkboard in working with my small group. Here is a sample dialogue:

Teacher: Let's talk about yesterday afternoon when you went home from school. What do you remember?

Carolyn: I had to go next door to stay at my friend's because my mother was still at work.

Teacher: And then . . .

Carolyn: Well, I played over there. My friend has a puzzle. We put it together.

Teacher: It was hard?

Carolyn: No, it was her little brother's. So we tried to do it real fast and we got to laughing.

Teacher: Anyone else?

Tenisha: I played with my cat. She's just a kitten and she's crazy! I had to change my shoes and I couldn't do it because she kept playing and hitting my hands when I tried to tie them.

Jennifer: I've got a canary and she's noisy. I cover her up when she's noisy. Then she shuts up.

Andy: I had to go to the doctor's and get a shot.

Group: Ohhhhh!

Andy: Yeah, and I didn't cry either.

Teacher: You felt like you wanted to?

Andy: Not really, but I was still afraid I would.

Teacher: I don't like shots. Anyone else ever have a shot?

Brendan: I got a lot in the hospital. I cried. I got sick of 'em.

Carolyn: I had a 'fection and got one. The needle was this big!
[shows with hands].

Teacher: I had one last summer when I stepped on a nail. When the nurse comes with the needle, I look the other way so I can't see it.

The first entry point into writing is simple conversation. In this instance, the teacher has chosen to open discussion about what happened yesterday afternoon after school. She listens carefully to what the children say and extends their comments with a few questions. Her language is responsive, and not until much later—during the discussion about shots—does she interject her own experience. When the discussion turns to shots, she sees that this is a common discussion topic for all the children and lets the discussion run its course. Then she observes:

Teacher: I've learned all different kinds of things from you. Some of you played like Carolyn with her puzzles; Tenisha had her cat, Andy had a shot and we've all had shots, Brendan too, and Jennifer has her canary. We've done lots of things and things have happened to us. I would like you to take this paper and write about one of the things we've talked about or anything else that comes to mind. I think I'll choose my dog, Billy.

Billy and I go for walks together when I get home. I'll quickly make a sketch of him here—the two of us walking. This is the lead I snap onto his collar [quick sketch].

Now I'm going to write something to go with it. What do I want to say? Let's see. "Billy and I go for walks." Help me.

B . . . il . . . ly [She says the word very slowly].

Help me with the first sound "B." What letter do I write here?

Brendan: "B." I've got that one in my own name. It's easy.

Teacher: Right you are. Listen for any other sounds you hear in the word. I'll say it again slowly.

Carolyn: I hear an "l."

Jennifer: I hear an "e."

Teacher: Actually it isn't an "e." But it sounds like one. Good going.

The children continue to help the teacher compose, volunteering the names of the letters that go with the sounds she needs to represent. She "invents" the sounds that go with her text after drawing a quick sketch. Data show that a drawing often helps the child to think about what might be said in the text that follows. In this demonstration the teacher is showing:

- where writing comes from (actual events in their lives)
- that drawing can be helpful to writing by serving as a rehearsal for the text that follows. Soon children will be placing more information in their drawings than exist in their text, but the drawing serves to help the child contextually with the text when they read the words.
- how to invent the words and write them:
 - slow the text down by saying it slowly and aloud
 - help children use the resources of the letters in their own names
 - place spaces between words to help with rereading
 - compose from left to right
 - show how particular letters that go with particular sounds are formed
- how to make the transition from oral to written discourse

Many skills are involved in demonstrating writing and for this reason, many successive demonstrations are needed to help children become more independent writers. (You will find further help in teaching very young children who are emergent spellers in Chapter 16.)

ACTION 4.1:

If you are teaching kindergarten or first grade, choose a small group of children who exemplify the criteria mentioned on page 48 and introduce them to writing through your own oral discussion and demonstration.

When the children set out to put their notions on paper, you may notice some of the following:

- Some just draw. Some may draw only one object, a few, many, or even an entire scene.
- Some draw and put one letter, an initial letter, to go with the drawing.
- Some write whole words by using primarily the initial and final consonants only.
- Some have sight words.
- Some of the children may not be responsive to a "retelling." Narrative doesn't interest them.

- A few children are afraid to invent. They are sophisticated enough to know that words have only one spelling. They *demand* your help and want you to supply them with correct spellings for all that they write.

This is the short list of what may happen when children write. Since you can't supply all the words children need for full spellings, resist the temptation to respond to the child who wants you to spell all of them. You can help this child by supplying the full spelling of *one key word* in a sentence. I say to that child, "Okay, you choose one very important word; I'll give it to you, but you need to invent the others on your own or get help from someone else. I don't have time to do all of them."

There are some children who do not find a story-type discussion helpful. Making a list and giving commands or directions is closer to their communication and thinking needs.

Here is how I would demonstrate this type of introduction:

Teacher: Sometimes I like to make lists of things.

Watch, here's a kind of a list. I know different kinds of animals [if children are at the point of learning how to invent, I say the word slowly and they help supply the letters to put on the board]

bear

deer

cat

dog

Help me with my list.

Child: Tiger.

Teacher: Good, another . . .

Child: Lion.

Teacher: Right. You can make a list, draw them, or even draw them first and write afterward. These pages are for doing the list kind of writing. [The paper children use for this type of writing is much smaller, allowing for a drawing and a label to go with it.] I'll do the first one on my list.

Teacher: We can make another kind of list. How about cars?

Here's a start:

Ford

Toyota

Mercury

Tell me some more cars I could put down here.

Child: Subaru.

Child: GMC truck.

Teacher: Of course, another list could be different kinds of cars like sedan, pickup. Give me some others . . .

Children are naturally inquisitive and like to think they know a lot about certain subject areas. The discovery of different areas is as important as the lists that go with them. Inventing with the children during the list-making also seems to help them build up associations between drawings, sounds, and the letters they place on the page. Again, many children who may not feel the urge to begin to explore narrative enjoy listing. The point is to begin to help children to find out what writing and print can do for them—today.

ACTION 4.2:

Choose a small group of children who don't seem to be as interested in the narrative side and try exploring lists. (If appropriate, have them help you invent the spellings of the words.)

Remember that some children are not yet ready to make letters to go with objects or drawings. They may still be scribbling and making random drawings that have not yet reached more traditional forms (see Harste, Woodward and Burke [1984]; also Temple, Nathan, Burris and Temple [1988]). The two examples given as introductory modes thus far (story-telling about yesterday and listing) are for children who already have a general sense of sound-symbol correspondence and are ready to communicate. In short, each of these examples is intended to open the door to the mode of communication preferred by particular children.

One last example of an entry point into writing is the sign or brief command. Thomas Newkirk (1989, 23) shows that children embed the rudiments of argument in the signs they compose. His six-year-old daughter composed this sign:

Desin-a-button

only 75 cents the desin
chuck.E.cheese
Unicon rainbows

and much much more

it's a better price
than last year
75 cents

Newkirk points out the complexity of the sign's content:

- Major assertion: Buy a design-a-button
- Major reason: Low cost
- Evidence: The cost is seventy-five cents
- Major reason: The many designs (implied)
- Evidence: Chuck E. Cheese, unicorns, rainbows, and much, much more.

He also notes that young children's first use of print may be in brief signs like "Keep Out," "Stop," "Stay Out," or in short messages intended to influence others. Indeed, these may be the more elemental forms of essay and exposition.

Teacher: There's a kind of writing that can be pretty useful. See that sign over there? What do you suppose it says?

Child: Go out.

Teacher: Good. That's what it means. It says "Exit." That's where you can go out of the building. It shows you where to go. Have you seen any other signs that you know?

Child: Out front it says "stop" for the buses.

Child: My brother has one for his room that says "keep out."

Teacher: Let's have some signs you'd like to make to help others or have them do things.

Child: I'd like a "quiet" sign. It gets pretty noisy sometimes and I'd like to hold it up when that happens.

Teacher: I like that one. That's a hard one to write though. I'll say it slowly and then write it.

Q u i e t

Okay, I have one for you. Let's see if you can read my sign:
"Can you help me?" [She helps the children to read the message and to quietly leave the group and go to their seats.]

The teacher goes on to help children observe other signs that are displayed in the building. She stresses the communicative nature of

signs or short requests: they exist to help people—sometimes the writer and sometimes the people the writer wishes to address. They go on to discuss signs the children might like to make or those they notice in their classroom, school, or community.

ACTION 4.3:

Experiment with making and reading signs and messages with a small group of children.

Notice which children first understand the function of sign and message making. Until children have a rough approximation of the meaning of sign and message making, writing won't make much sense. We explore, explain, and demonstrate over and over what print can do as a communicative medium. One of the best ways I have found to help children extend their understanding of print as communication is to write very short messages to them.

"Come see me."

"I saw you tie your shoe."

"Good work."

"Come to the small table."

If I wish to have a group come to the table, I'll pass out small slips to those children I wish to meet with me. If they can't read the message they may consult with another child.

ACTION 4.4:

Practice writing short messages to children and note how they make meaning out of them.

Second Through Sixth Grades

My starting points for older students do not vary a great deal from those from grades two through six. I begin with a demonstration of "reading my world" for the previous day (see Chapter 3). I select elements from my day that will be of interest to older children. I match

the complexity of my observations to their age, experience with writing, and sophistication.

ACTION 4.5:

Demonstrate where topics come from in the everyday experience, selecting incidents from your own life that will interest your students.

Don: I'd like to show you how I "read the world" around me in order to use what I see for things I might write about. I'll tell you about what happened, show you how I think about it, and then it would be helpful if you'd ask questions about what I say. You might be curious to know more about something; if so, raise your hand and ask the question. Okay, I'll start and then I'll put some notes on the board as I talk.

Let's see, about 4:00 P.M. I was in my study and I was on the telephone. You know I've always liked to have a place to go to that was mine. When I was your age I got a table and I made believe it was my desk.

It had a little slide you could pull out and one small drawer. I thought I was big stuff. I shared my room with my brother. The desk was on my side of the room. I'll put a few notes here to help me remember:

*in my study
when I was a kid
wanted a place of my own
a desk, drawer
be alone*

I was lucky because my brother didn't like to be alone in the room; he liked to be outside. Well, I liked to be outside but I also wanted to be alone and just think. How many of you like to be alone in a room? How many of you would rather be outside? See, we're all different in some ways, the same in others.

I remember once my mother sent me to my room because I hadn't done my chores.

Child: What were your chores?

Don: Oh, we had to take turns doing the dishes. I was a boy and I didn't think that was right. My mother just said, "Get busy." She was pretty strict. Any of you have chores or jobs around the house?

Child: I have to walk my dog.

Child: I have to help my dad mow the lawn. I also have to make my bed every day and take out the trash.

Child: I have to take care of my little brother. Every day after school!!

Don: Just a minute, I've got to get some of this down.

Mow the lawn. (I had to do that too.)

Do dishes, not fair.

Anyway, as I said, I got sent to my room. That was a way my mother punished me sometimes. Got a spanking once too.

Child: What did you do?

Don: I'll never forget it. My brother and I took our dog, Rags, for a walk and we didn't come home until after dark. We just forgot what we were doing and how late it was. Our parents were frightened out of their wits. When we got home they were glad to see us and very angry at the same time. Both my brother and I got turned over my Dad's knee and spanked real hard. I tried not to cry; I think I just yelled a little.

Okay, I'm going to stop there. Now watch what I'll do with what I've written (see Figure 4.1). I'd like you to try something and see how it goes.

Notice that I simply started by going to my study. "How come?" I said to myself. And I got an answer inside my head, "I've always enjoyed going there. Even as a kid." That sent my mind way back to when I was your age. Then I remembered something else, how I got sent to my room for not doing my chores. You asked questions about what I'd done wrong, and then I remembered still more about other punishments. See how one thing leads to

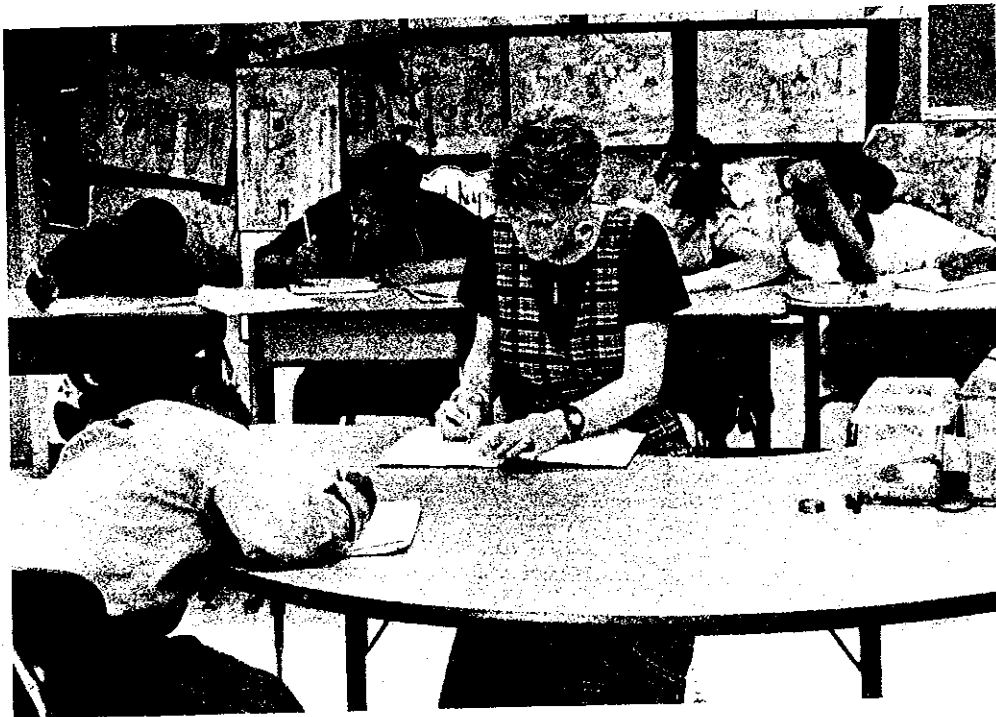
▲▼ Figure 4.1
Demonstration

| WHAT HAPPENED? | REMINDS ME |
|--------------------|--|
| 4:00 to my study → | always wanted place of my own as a kid |
| Chores → | my desk |
| sent to my room → | had to do dishes |
| spanking → | enjoyed being alone |
| | walked dog too late |
| | didn't want to cry |

another. I let my mind run; I listen to myself and find lots to write about. So much of writing is connected to just remembering and being curious about what's there.

The basic objective here is to help students learn how to *listen to themselves*. I need to show them how I do that; and, of course, some of my reflections have been prompted by their questions. For many children, learning to listen to themselves is a new experience. Much of our education says, "Listen to me" (the teacher or the parent). There is little teaching that shows our children how to do this. I used to say to my sixth-grade students, "Think for yourselves. I want to know what you are thinking." The trouble is, I never showed them what I meant by that or where original thinking comes from.

Sadly, most students do not know how to find topics in the common everyday events that surround them. At this point in their lives



The Teacher Writes with the Class

they can only seize on major events: a trip to New York or Disney World, or *someone else's experience* on television or motion pictures. Unless we show them how to select topics from the ordinary events of their own lives and expand them into fiction, an essay, or a personal narrative, they can only draw on the experiences of others, which they do not necessarily understand.

I would mention too that one demonstration, like the one portrayed here, will not go very far. Our children need to see us do this many times: once a week at least in a short mini-lesson. Further, recognize that only a few children can start writing in this way. Still, it opens the door to many other topics for those children who are ready.

ACTION 4.6:

Show children the options for writing topics from an everyday reading of the world.

I return to the content of my demonstration to show children the origins of various genres. Here is some sample dialogue that demonstrates what we might discover:

Don: Let me show you where fiction comes from. Fiction comes from people wanting something and the journey they take to get it. Let's go to what I've just reviewed here. Let's create something that somebody wants.

Child: Well, you said you wanted a place of your own. Well, we could have this kid who wanted to be a scientist and he wanted his own laboratory.

Don: Got it; yes, that's it. Now the story comes from maybe things that got in his way to getting it.

Same child: Well, maybe he was poor and he found some boxes and he made one up in his basement and he just can't find boxes.

Don: Right, that's fiction: A boy who wants his own place to experiment and he works really hard to find boxes and there are all kinds of adventures on the way to finding boxes.

Don: Let's have another.

Child: Well, maybe there is this girl and her father has remarried and she has lots of chores. Her stepmother just picks on her. She wants to please her father because she misses her real mother but her stepmother wants to keep her out of the way so she can have her father all to herself.

Don: Okay, let's see if we have fiction here. Do we have someone who wants something?

Child: Yes, a girl who wants her father.

Don: What's in the way?

Child: A stepmother who gives her chores to keep her out of the way.

In Chapter 18 I will discuss how you can be of greater help to children writing fiction. Here I only show the basic ingredients inspired by what I experienced the previous day: a character who wants something and the kind of conflict that gets in the way.

ACTION 4.7:

Conduct a series of writing conferences in which the children teach you about what they know.

The purpose of the writing conference is to help children teach you about what they know so that you can help them more effectively with their writing. When you showed children how to "read the world" in Action 4.5, you showed them how to discover what they know, choose those areas for topics, and then write about them. Thus, as you move around the room conducting conferences try to note what children write in their texts and help them to speak to you. I usually come to each student with these notions in mind:

- what the topic is about
- where the topic came from
- what they will write next

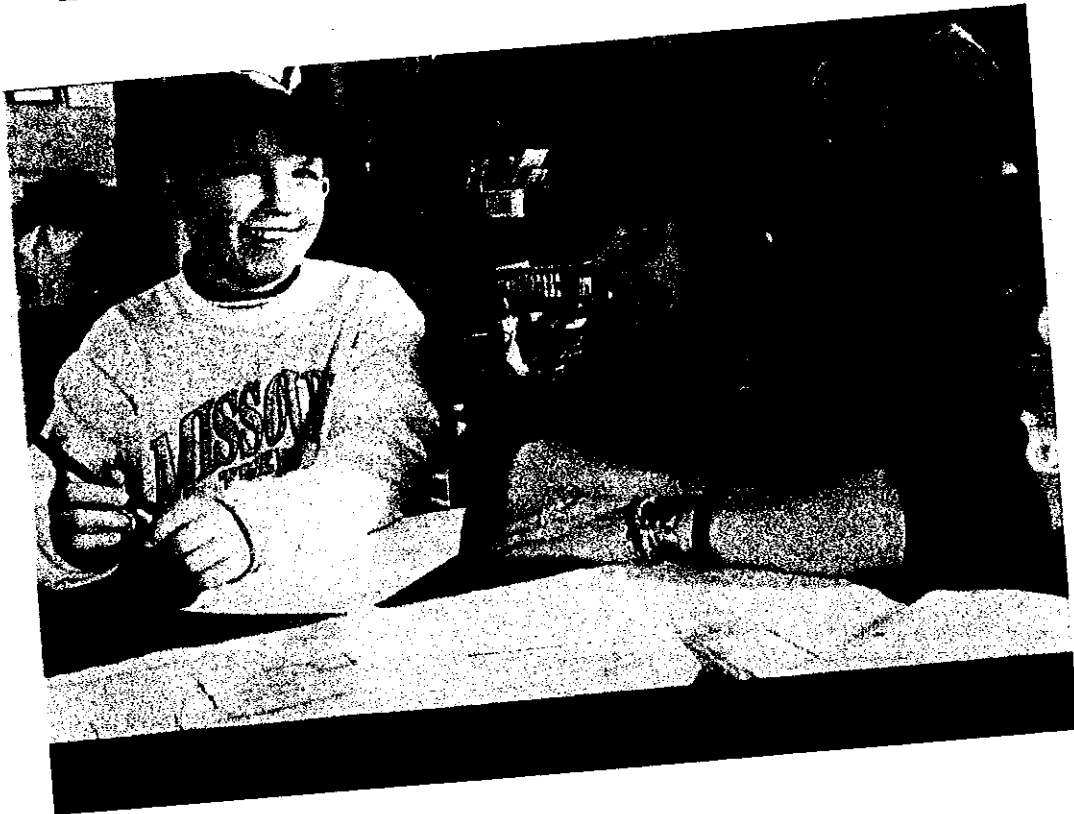
For your first conferences choose three to four children who are already writing. Get the feel of the writing conference by working with children who find it easier to talk about what they are doing. The unspoken guideline in the conference is "You know things that I don't."

Don: What is your piece about, Jennifer?

Jennifer: It's about my cat and how she plays with me.

Don: Oh, tell me about a time she played with you.

Jennifer: Well, she likes to stick her paws through the up and down things under the bannister (I forget what you call 'em) and when I put my finger up she hits it like she's a boxer. She doesn't use her claws.



The Child Initiates in a Conference

Don: I can almost see her doing that—her paws darting in and out. What will you write next?

Jennifer: Hmmm, maybe I'll write about that. I was just finishing a part here about how she plays with my toes under the covers in the morning.

Don: Looks like you have lots to write.

I notice that Jennifer can say what her piece is about in one sentence. This is an important ability that writers of all ages need to acquire. She focuses on the central characters (herself and the cat) and the essential action (we play). I quickly ask Jennifer to tell me some specifics that relate to her essential topic: "Tell me about a time she played with you." I listen carefully to what she says the piece is about, and then I ask a question she is mostly likely able to answer. If Jennifer is unable to handle that question I would ask one that may put

her in touch with why she chose the topic in the first place: "How did you happen to write about you and your cat playing, Jennifer?" Sometimes children lose touch with the reason they chose their topic. When Jennifer remembers why she decided to write about her cat, she may also recall episodes and memories about the cat.

I try to restrict this type of conference to about two minutes and to keep my comments to a minimum. A rough profile of a good conference shows the child speaking about 80 percent of the time, the teacher 20 percent. You may wish to tape-record your conference to get a sense of the ratio of your talk to the child's talk and to assess how well you are able to prompt the child to tell you about what they know.

I end each conference by stating what the child will write about next or what to do in order to move forward on the piece. Of course, the child may already have told me what she intends to do, and this is especially important for students who find it difficult to write.

Another conference might involve a child in the midst of a dilemma: he is wondering about the right topic for his piece.

Don: What's your piece about, Jeff?

Jeff: I don't know. It's all over the place. I'm afraid it will be boring. See, I want there to be good action here. I want it to be about these people who are fighting off the space invaders but maybe it's about just the space invaders.

Don: I'm curious about how you decided to choose this topic to write about, Jeff.

Jeff: Well, when we were doing that thing you did with us, I got to thinking about space and weapons; it's what I think about a lot, the ultimate weapon, so I wanted the ultimate weapon in here.

Don: Tell me about the person who uses it.

Jeff: Well, there is this mad scientist who is in charge of it. He developed it.

Don: Why is he mad?

Jeff: Oh, hmmm. His mind snapped because he was treated badly by the other scientists.

Don: Okay, let's stop there, Jeff. I've learned quite a bit about your scientist and what you had in mind. He is mad because he was treated badly and now he has a weapon he will use. My last question is, What does he want? What does the mad scientist want? Something is bugging him because he can't get what he wants. Take this piece of paper and just write for five minutes about what he wants and why.

This conference turned out to be longer than most. Jeff has a sense of what he wants to do, but it doesn't match what is on his paper. In addition, he has lost sight of what he is doing because he is worrying so much about composing a piece that is boring. Children often lose sight of what they've set out to do, especially with fiction. The solution to most of their problems is character, like Jeff's mad scientist. In fiction, character is all. Things happen because of what characters want and how they get stopped from getting what they want. I left Jeff writing on another piece of paper in order to develop a character with some substance. Once he has a central character, his fiction will be more successful. (Chapter 18 will discuss more ways to help this kind of student.)

Remember, the main purpose of the conference is to encourage the student to show you what he knows and gain a clearer picture of what he will write next. I concentrate on *flow* for the student and *learning* for me.

In this next conference, I encounter a child who is writing fiction more closely rooted in personal experience. Too much of children's fiction is far afield from what they know, and therefore it is more difficult to help them show you what they know.

Don: What is your piece about, Andy?

Andy: Well, it's about this team that's undefeated and they are going to play the best team in the league.

Don: I see. And what's going to happen?

Andy: They are going to win in overtime even though their star player has gone out on fouls.

Don: I'd gather this is basketball. Is there a main character in the piece?

Andy: Yeah, it's the boy who fouled out and he's so disappointed that he has let the team down.

Don: And what are you writing about right now? What's next?

Andy: He's just fouled out and he's sitting on the bench wondering what he's done. But one of the subs comes through; that's what's next.

Andy has a good sense of where he is in the piece, of his character, and of who will save the day. This is a short conference because Andy knows just where he is going. I have learned from him and he knows what's next.

As you move around the room conducting conferences, the other children are listening. It is easier for them to write if they catch your

encouraging tone: "You know things that I will learn from you." This allows them to learn from themselves and each other more easily. You set the standard for learning through your attentive listening.

ACTION 4.8:

Conduct a writing share session with a small group or with the entire class.

For this Action, gather the children in a circle or on the floor in one section of the room. The share session comes at the end of the writing time. For your first share session you may wish to select certain children to share what they have written thus far, or ask for two or three volunteers. This is how I introduce the session:

Don: Two people will be sharing their writing this morning. Danny will share first, but before he reads his piece he'll tell us the one thing it is about. Then it will be our job to listen very carefully, because when he finishes we'll tell him what we *remember* from it.

Dan [reading]: Last Saturday me and my Dad went to the science museum in Boston. I remember the owl especially because of the way he turned his head. It was like he could turn it all the way around. When the man held him he told us about his sharp claws. They were long.

Then there was Tyrannosaurus Rex. If you lived when he did he would be able to eat you with one bite.

He was very tall—about fifty feet high.

We had pizza for lunch. We got home about seven o'clock.

Don: All right, Danny, you are in charge. You call on the children whose hands are raised. They will tell you what they remember. You'll need to listen carefully too in case we forget some things that are in your piece.

Child: I remember the Tyrannosaurus Rex. How big he was.

Child: You had pizza.

Child: The owl had long, sharp claws.

Child: Tyrannosaurus Rex was fifty feet high.

Child: You went to the science museum.

Don: All right, Danny, what did we forget?

Dan: The owl can turn his head almost completely around. And we got home about seven o'clock.

The first thing children need to be able to do is to listen carefully to a classmate's text. I call this *receiving the text*. Further, children need to learn how to listen to a text so they remember before they ask questions. I find that, unless children work hard to listen to what a writer has written, their questions border on the trivial. Just for practice, you may wish to allow the children to ask a few questions of the author after they have received the piece.

Final Reflection

In this chapter you have introduced yourself and your students to three basic elements in the writing classroom: discovering writing topics, writing conferences, and sharing. The Actions I describe are useful to teachers throughout their entire careers. They work to refine them virtually every day of their professional lives.

You *demonstrated* the sources of your own writing for the children. You showed them how you learned from your world and from their world during your conferences with them. You made it possible for them to learn from each other by sharing their own writing.

I suggest that you try each of these Actions *on successive days for at least one week* in order to begin to be comfortable with them in the writing classroom.

As you moved around the room conducting conferences or demonstrated topic origins with the children you probably noticed that children are at different points in their development. This will be the focus of the next chapter.